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May 2014 Vol 27 No. 5
COMPLIMENTARY

Milwaukee County Senior Citizen Hall of Fame

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Bob Leskovar, his pals and the amazing sport of dartball

By Jack Pearson

In any sport there are players who eventually become stars, some even superstars. That rather obvious maxim thus applies to dartball, the sport featured in this column. Dartball is somewhat of an enigma to most people, so perhaps what follows will clear the air. To begin with, throwing darts is nothing new. There have been games played with darts in a somewhat baseball oriented manner, and this is called dartball.

So here is a brief rundown of the game as well as a bit about some of the people who play in it, and especially one of them, whose accomplishments in the sport are quite incredible. His name is Bob Leskovar, and he is past 71 now and lives in the south side of Milwaukee. At that advanced age he's not merely hanging on; he's the best dartball player in Wisconsin, quite possibly the best in the whole country.

This is part of the very special magic and uniqueness of dartball; in a highly competitive, physical sport

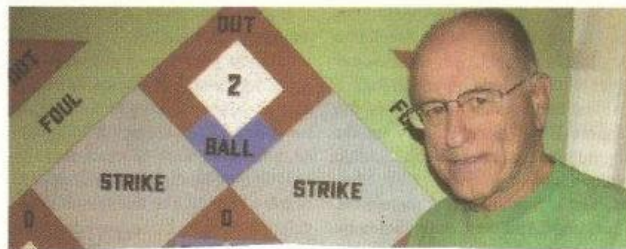


where in the world where as much dartball activity exists – league competition and tournaments as well as simply social gatherings – than here and throughout Wisconsin. It has been that way for some time. More than 70 years ago, on March 31, 1941, Life magazine ran a feature citing Philadelphia, where the sport originated, as well as Milwaukee and Kansas City, as being strongholds of the game in America. Today there are more than 40,000 who play the game in Wisconsin, and more than 2,000 teams.

It was noted earlier that dartball could be described as a form of baseball. It is, and is played inside with



Six of Dartball's star players, from the left, Jim Hickie, Bud Bolling, Archie Dadian, Mike Studer, Bob Leskovar and Jerry Mathwig.



played by all ages, it is a grandpa in his 70s who is the best player.

Up front I must point out that Bob did not request this story and especially not the commentary about himself. The topic was my choice, not only because the game of dartball is such an interesting sport, but also because it is all but ignored by the media today. Over the years, Leskovar regularly sent in the results of local dartball tournaments to the 50 Plus office, so I surmised that he'd be a good source of information. I called him, and he was most obliging, sending a pile of background material, internet sites and names of people to interview. He never mentioned his own input or his mind boggling array of accomplishments. I came up with those on my own. If you read on, you'll learn of them and perhaps agree with my assessment.

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Bob Leskovar and the tools of his sport, darts and a dartboard. Bob is considered the top Dartball player in Wisconsin, and although he denies it, he is just that.

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agement when a shot is missed and praise when a difficult one is made, are always there, too. Every player tries his best to win, of course, but good sportsmanship and having an enjoyable time are equally important. This is what sport really should be all about but, often, this has been all but forgotten in too many other sporting venues.

There are other reasons for its popularity. The costs for dartball are surprisingly low, both for equipment needed and in fees to play. A player's outlay for an entire season can be less than he'd pay for one round of golf. It's also a game for everyone: women as well as men, and all ages, from the teens on up to seniors in their '90s. One does not have to be a super athlete to play, either. Many dartball players have never been proficient in any other sport.

That's enough on background of the sport. Now for more on Leskovar.

Baseball fans know that two of the greatest hitters in the history of the game were Ty Cobb and Ted Williams. Cobb had a lifetime average of .367, and Williams was the last major League player to top .400 in a single



More Dartball icons, this group from nearly a half century ago, the 1965 Wisconsin State Champions, Vans's Shop Rite of West Allis. That's team manager Jerry Mathwig just left of the trophy, the late Jack Willison, lower left, and Jim Hinckle, upper right. All three are now in the Wisconsin Dartball Hall of Fame.

season, .406 in 1941. Now remember, it was noted earlier that darts was a form of baseball, using darts, but with hits and runs and batting averages. Leskovar has been active as a player for 55 years; it would have been 57 but he was in the Army for two years. In every one of those 55 seasons, he hit over .500! In 35 of them he hit over .600; and in three of them he hit over .700. No dartball player in Wisconsin, and I never heard of one anywhere, has ever come anywhere close to those accomplishments. His .717 average over the 1983 season is the highest ever attained in Wisconsin. Most dartball players are thrilled if they manage to be on the championship team in just one state tourney. Bob has been on 11, an unprecedented feat.

"When I think back on how it all began I have to laugh," Bob said. "I was such a skinny, scrawny kid, not tall or strong enough for any of the major sports. My dad was in a church dartball league, and one day took me along with him. I was about 15 then, and as I recall, I became hooked right away. I finally found a sport I could

play. Four or five days a week I'd go down into the basement and practice shooting darts at my dad's dartboard. Hundreds and hundreds of practice throws, until I couldn't lift my arm. But I thrived on it."

Besides all his hitting feats, awards and championships in dartball, Bob has been an active member of the State Dartball Committee for 26 years, and has served as the secretary treasurer of the South Milwaukee Dartball League for 34 years. He has also run those two tournaments in South Milwaukee for the past several years.

All of the above hitting feats and other accomplishments by Leskovar I learned of through the Internet or from newspaper records. The man just does not blow his own horn. "That's Bob, the way he's always been," said Pancho Palesse, another of his long time buddies and an area sport legend himself. "I'll bet he didn't tell you he was the pitcher for the Schaff Funeral Home team in our Monday Senior VMP Softball League, either. Well, with him pitching, they've won the championship of the league for the

past three years."

By the way, Bob and his wife, Lucille, have three children and two grandchildren.

Considering the similarities between dartball and other sports, one that comes to mind is the existence of dedicated individuals who have been and are responsible for the game's growth and well being. For example, here in Wisconsin, people such as Curly Lambeau, and what he meant to football, and Bud Selig, and likewise what he meant to baseball fit that bill. Had Lambeau not been around, there wouldn't be any Green Bay Packers or Lambeau Field, and had Selig not been on the scene, there wouldn't be any Milwaukee Brewers or Miller Park Stadium either. It has been the same in dartball. Back in the early years, men such as Harold "Zip" Morgan, Ernie Dorrow Sr. and Jack Willison Sr. were the hard working honchos in charge.

Fast forward to the present day. Besides Leskovar, there are a good number of individuals in this area who have and still are doing much to keep the sport healthy. Some include Jim

Hinkle of St. Francis, Jerry Mathwig of West Allis, Archie Dadian of South Milwaukee, Bud Bolling of Milwaukee, Mike Studer of Franklin, and Cliff Mengert, formerly of Milwaukee but who now lives in Alabama, to name just a few.

JIM HINCKLE - It's easy to spot Jim, now going on 70, at any dartball event. He's the one with the long, white beard and looks like Santa Claus. Considering all Jim has done and continues to do in the sport, this column could have been written just about him. To begin with, he's been one of the game's top players since 1959. He is also the founder and current editor of the online Dartball News, a newsletter sent to players in eight states. In another journalistic effort, he is busily at work putting together a history of the sport. (Since he keeps adding to it, he may never finish it, but when and if he does, I've promised to feature it in this column.) "Most Dartball players got started in the game by watching their dads play," Jim said. "In my case, would you believe, it was my wife, actually

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my wife-to-be, that I was watching as she threw the darts. It was in a CYO league, and she, Bonnie is her name, and her brother were competing on a team. We were all about 15 years old, and, of course, I thought she looked pretty good. I reasoned that the best way to get to know her was to join into the dartball action, too. I was successful in my plan, obviously, as we have been married for a half century, have five kids and three granddaughters. So all in all, Dartball has been very, very good to me."

JERRY MATHWIG - You've heard of the super long careers of sports stars such as George Blanda in football and Minnie Minoso and Milwaukee's own Warren Spahn in baseball, all between 25 and 30 years, which is quite commendable. But in reality they're all pikers in the longevity area in comparison with dartball's Jerry Mathwig. Jerry began playing Dartball in 1943 when he was 14 years old (Roosevelt was still President, you could buy a glass of beer for a dime and the only one with a cell phone device was Dick Tracy). Anyhow, Jerry took to the game with such enthusiasm that he never stopped and is still competing 71 years later (and still counting). Even at his age, he can still hold his own with all the young

"whippersnappers."

Longevity actually runs in Jerry's family. His uncle, Elmer Mathwig, was reportedly still playing dartball on a competitive basis at age 96, and stopped only because they took his driver's license away and he couldn't get to the matches. Elmer lived on until he was 101.

Jerry was one of those first three gentlemen to be inducted into the Wisconsin Dartball Hall of Fame. His high season average was a .575 in 1946; he's competed in 60 state championship tournaments; and has been on the State Committee for 44 years. Jerry and his wife, Janice, have three sons, 12 grandchildren and 13 great grandkids, proving that he does find time for a few things other than dartball.

ARCHIE DADIAN - Besides his athletic achievements, Archie is one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet. He'll chat with you for as long as you choose, and is wonderfully gregarious for being such a superstar. Aside from that, how many guys have been inducted into the Halls of Fame of two different sports? One of Wisconsin's all-time great golfers, he was named to the WSGA Hall of Fame in 1980, and to the Wisconsin Dartball Hall soon after its creation in 2009.

He won an almost unbelievable

total of 117 golf tournaments in Wisconsin and elsewhere, including 11 Billy Sixty Bestball events and 10 WSGA Senior Bestballs, both with several different partners. Besides golf and dartball, he was a top basketball player in high school and college, and won the conference scoring title when he was at the old Spencerian College. His first sport? You'd never guess: marbles. "Hey, I was pretty good," he said, laughing. "My brother won the state championship one year, and I could beat him."

That Archie has been so active and successful athletically is a wonder. He's had several major operations over the years including three complete hip replacements, the most recent just this past month.

Get this: Archie's dartball team consists of him and Vern Kappes, both 81, Bud Bolling, 85, and Marty Gaudian, 89. That totals 256 years, and they'll take on anyone in the world, of any age. Archie, Bud and Marty are all in the Dartball Hall of Fame, and Vern is a world champion speed skater. A word of advice: Don't bet against them.

He and his wife 'Shirley' have four children and eight grandkids, all of which has led to a new career for both of them—babysitting. "Every day, too," Archie said, "from ear-

ly morning to late afternoon." How much do you get paid?, I asked. "Hah! he replied. "You have to be kidding."

In addition to those players, others whom Leskovar listed as men who have not only been top notch players over the years, but who have done much to help the game include Bud Bolling, Mike Studer and Cliff Mengert, as well as Marty Gaudian, Chuck Spahn, Mark "Doc" Drow, Mike "Wimpy" Wendorf and Rick "The Bay View Bomber" Fare, "to name just a handful," Bob said. "You could list dozens more." So our apologies, but we've already exceeded our space limit.

Something Leskovar emphasized was the need to bring new, younger players into the game. "You must have noticed that all the players you've written about are getting up there in age," he said, "in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The only way that the sport is going to be able to continue is if young people come along to replace us old-timers. Dartball is a great game, anyone can play, and the costs are minimal. I know 50 Plus is read by seniors, but seniors have kids and grandkids that they can talk to. If anyone is interested they can call me at 414-321-5916 or E-mail www.wis-dartball.com."